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Refutation of empiricist aesthetics

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REFERENCES

Rochlitz, Rainer. *L'Art au banc d'essai : esthétique et critique*, Paris : Gallimard, 1998, (Essais)

- 1 In an earlier work titled *Subversion et Subvention* (1994), Rainer Rochlitz was embroiled in the debate about contemporary art, and had appraised the works in question, the authors involved, and the general state of the art arena and the manifestations thereof which were at that time on view. In his book he lamented the resignation of criticism caused, in his view, both by institutional pressures and the habits of “art’s self-proclamation since Duchamp, bolstered by theories such as those of Nelson Goodman, who defines art independently of any idea of ‘quality’.” (p.60).
- 2 With *L'Art au banc d'essai : esthétique et critique*, Rochlitz keeps his distance from the everyday interests of the art arena and lays the bases of a “reconstructive and critical” aesthetics. Rochlitz suggests a remedy for the lawlessness of taste to the non-philosopher reader who raises questions about the motivations and purposes of this undertaking, and to anyone who wonders what necessity peculiar to the general development of philosophy, or to the interrogation of certain fundamental concepts, might call for an *aggiornamento*, or alternatively what transformation of artistic praxis and its place in society might require that the available concepts be rethought. His book, which is based on a division between “aesthetic principles” and “didactic analyses”, does not, in the first part anyway, shed philosophical arguments. In the second part, devoted to the works of Don DeLillo and Jean Echenoz where literature is concerned, and Gerhard Richter and Jeff Wall where the visual arts are concerned, it is intent on illustrating in an exemplary way its “angles of problematization”. A reading of it gradually reveals what is brutally declared by the review slip: Rochlitz has appointed himself the task of refuting a “liberal and, by nature, empirical” aesthetics, formulated over the past few decades by Nelson Goodman, Arthur Danto and Gérard Genette. This aesthetics is typified by the attention it

affords the *Transfiguration du banal* (Danto, 1989), and, *inter alia*, the posterity of Marcel Duchamp in 20th century art (Goodman, Genette), hitherto out of reach, or more or less inaccessible to philosophers and aestheticians. This is where the rub would appear to lie: it is pertinent to refute philosophers who allow reflection about the art in which Rochlitz does not believe, and thus reinstate values that have been forgotten, lost or threatened by the consequences of a globalization of culture.

- 3 Rochlitz considers that any work of art is a candidate for recognition as such, that the professional processes of approval (by training) no longer exist, and that empiricist aesthetics offers no resistance to the selections of the institution. He replaces this by many kinds of certifying authorities which must pronounce themselves on works and artists alike. This plurality of authorities and reasoned verdicts might have given rise to an (expected) description, for debates about contemporary art have, rightly or wrongly, had a marked effect in France and elsewhere, by way of the feeling of an institutional monolithism which is rarely contradicted by other authorities, such as criticism and the market. This was not Rochlitz's option, however. Rather, he has endeavoured to invalidate open reflection about the system of autographical and allographical works, nevertheless perceived as something very positive by visual artists who are captives of representations of the artwork limited to a system that is less and less compatible with their praxis and the reality of methods of disseminating contemporary culture. It is a matter of showing that the semiotic characteristics considered by Goodman fail to define the specificity of the artwork by overlooking the claim of intersubjective recognition. This complement of common sense does admittedly go hand in hand with an attempt to thoroughly discredit the dissociation between ideal immanence and physical immanence (reformulation by Genette of the Goodmanian contrast) by the introduction of the notion of abode which would make it possible to preserve a work not concerned by the system issue. Rochlitz is of the view that it is only possible to broach aesthetic knowledge "from the performative standpoint of one taking part in aesthetic and artistic life", and that the purpose, first and foremost, of this knowledge is to recognize good works. Having singled out assertive and descriptive knowledge with a bearing on the objective world, and the normative knowledge attaching to the social world, Rochlitz does acknowledge the "particular" role played by works of art *vis-à-vis* the different aspects of the subjective world, but he points out: "The subjective world that is likely to be divided shows this analogy with the social world which is thus only fully accessible to it from the standpoint of someone taking part in the 'game', which is here artistic" (p. 102). Rochlitz does not admit the dissociation by Goodman of what is accessible to knowledge and of what might stem from a receptive diversity that is in some ways out of control. Goodman actually reverts to thinking that, despite its public status, which Rochlitz recognizes with Goodman, the work is only accessible from within the aesthetic field, where the contradictory but competent opinions of critics end up by producing a consensus, henceforth with universal or almost-universal values. The idea thus comes to the fore that the critical debate gradually constructs the value and the sound reading of works, and, in every aspect, our author prefers the albeit contradictory opinion of experts to the idiosyncrasy of individual readings.
- 4 Refutation is thus put forward as the major objective in the chapter devoted to critical judgements, with an attempt to salvage among those very people whom Goodman and others have criticized—such as Beardsley, for example—something with which to shore up a legitimate dismantling of their reasoning. This manoeuvre is not very profitable and

much not very “effectual” effort is made to borrow a judgemental criterion developed by Rochlitz. These didactic analyses are restricted to demonstrating how the occasional critic and the philosopher can soundly adjudge things and separate the wheat from the chaff, including among those artists who have authority. The philosopher of the critical debate arranges the opinions he contradicts in the practice of the critical exercise, when he perseveres beyond the call of duty in his role of one contradicting empiricist aesthetics.